

MALTA 1865: MEDICAL BACKGROUND TO BERKELEY GEORGE ANDREW MOYNIHAN

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NOTE

A party of surgeons belonging to the travelling Moynihan Chirurgical Club, whose membership includes leading British provincial surgeons, paid a visit to the Surgical Professorial Unit of the Faculty of Medicine and Surgery of our University on the 7th and 9th May 1969.

On the 7th May a plaque was unveiled at Lord Moynihan's birthplace, St. George's Bay, near St. Julians.

This paper was read on the 8th May at the Medical School, St. Luke's Hospital, at a meeting of the Club.

You have come to Malta to commemorate in his birthplace one of the most brilliant surgeons of all time — Lord Moynihan; but to view the occasion in its proper perspective you will have to travel back in time to visualise the medical scene during Moynihan's short residence in Malta between October 1865 and December 1867.

You would have arrived in Malta by a coal-burning steamship which would berth in the Quarantine Harbour of Marsamxett in the vicinity of the Lazzaretto where you would be landed for the performance of a period of quarantine, for in those days every passenger was regarded as a potential carrier of infectious disease. Each one of you would be isolated from his companions and assigned an almost bare apartment, the only items of furniture being a chair, a table and a wooden bedstead.

You would not be permitted to leave your room or enter other apartments or

receive visitors except under special surveillance. You would be allowed to communicate with your friends outside the Lazzaretto by means of letters but these would have to be first disinfected by smoking before delivery. To ensure that you adhered to these restrictions you would be watched and attended by a Health Guardian for whom, by the way, you had to provide not only his wages but also his daily meals; and you would be regaled by the sight of a dismal stone gal-lows nearby to remind you of the fate that awaited you if you dared to transgress the quarantine laws.

If, after a certain time you did not fall ill or die of plague or smallpox or cholera, you were granted pratique, that is you were set at liberty and allowed to roam about the Island at your pleasure.

The year 1865, however, was not a particularly attractive one for the visitor to Malta for on the 20th June cholera broke out in the Island, the epidemic reaching its peak at the beginning of August. The cause of cholera had not yet been discovered and its mode of propagation was not yet understood so that the sanitary precautions that were taken against the circumstances which were believed to provoke the disease were hardly effective at all; so much so that by the time it ended at the beginning of November, 3,000 cases, of whom more than half died, had occurred among the 134,000 inhabitants of the Maltese Islands. The figure of the Maltese physician Dr. Antonio Ghio stands out prominently against this backcloth of ignorance and suffering for he rightly in-

sisted that cholera was spread by means of excreta of infected persons and also envisaged the possibility of its transmission by apparently healthy carriers. To appreciate the significance of Dr. Ghio's remarks it is pertinent to remember that he was expressing them twenty years before Robert Koch discovered the cholera vibrio in 1884.

When the epidemic broke out in June, Mrs. Ellen Moynihan, the wife of Army Captain Andrew Moynihan and future mother of Berkeley George Andrew, was in her fifth month of pregnancy. She had been a witness to the scourge of cholera five years previously when this disease appeared on the troopship that was conveying her and her husband from India to England. She had then seen infants, children and adults succumb to the illness and being buried at sea. The cholera at Malta must have revived those memories for she again found herself right in the midst of the disease. She and her husband were living in the married quarters attached to Pembroke Camp, their house being one among a group of buildings situated at the foot of the slope from Pembroke to St. George's Bay. On the 27th July cholera appeared in the camp but it made little headway there being only eleven cases of which, however, nine ended fatally. The Moynihans escaped and in that house overlooking St. George's Bay, while the epidemic was still raging, Berkeley George Andrew was born on the 2nd October, 1865.

But let us return once more to the visitor to Malta in that year 1865 and catch a glimpse of the kind of medical attention he would have received had he fallen ill and been admitted to hospital. As elsewhere in Europe, the nursing standards were very low. The attendants were ill-mannered, unreliable, untrained and illiterate but there were two redeeming features in an otherwise disheartening situation: first, the female attendants in our hospitals never descended to the depths of moral degradation and alcoholic deterioration as their counterparts abroad; and secondly, by 1865 we had begun to feel the influence of the reforming zeal of

Florence Nightingale who, by the way, had passed through Malta on her way to the Crimea in 1854 and who, in 1862, had been advising a Maltese Government official on our nursing requirements.

In contrast to your uncouth and ignorant nurse, your physician was cultured, fully trained and with seven years of university education behind him and with medical qualifications that were acknowledged to be of such high standards by the University of London as to entitle him to admission to its medical degree. This, of course, does not mean that you would have particularly relished the treatment you would have received at his hands; but then we must remember to judge him by the contemporary state of medical knowledge and practice. Since 1854 he had been obliged by Maltese law to prescribe his drugs in conformity with the London Pharmacopoeia and, later on, the British Pharmacopoeia. In other respects, however, the sheet anchor of treatment was the use of the leech for combatting pain in swollen parts and for the relief of congestion in inflamed organs; while in acute febrile diseases — and of these there were many — purging by castor oil and liberal blood letting were the accepted methods of therapy.

You fared no better if you needed surgical treatment. You would have had the benefit of ether anaesthesia which was introduced into Malta as early as 1847 by Sir Thomas Spencer Wells when he was on the staff of the Malta Naval Hospital but you would have had no protection against infection during operative procedures. Indeed we must recall that Joseph Lister had first used a spray of carbolic acid to sterilize objects coming in contact with the patient on the operating table exactly in 1865 — to be precise on the 12th August at the Glasgow Royal Infirmary — less than two months before Moynihan was born. The year 1865 was, therefore, for Moynihan a memorable and fateful one not only because it marks his birth and his survival through a cholera epidemic but also because without Lister's fundamental contribution to surgery in that year — the introduction of antisepsis —

there would not have been a world famous abdominal surgeon Moynihan in later years. Indeed Moynihan himself, when he had become President of the Royal College of Surgeons, acknowledged the modern surgeon's indebtedness to Lister when he declared, on the occasion of the centenary of Lister's birth, that operative procedures previously unimaginable had become matters of daily occurrence thanks to that one man — Lister.

But in our year 1865 Moynihan's rise to fame (1896-1914) was still in the distant future and the land where he was destined to achieve success and recognition was far away from Malta. Indeed he was in our Island only for the first eighteen months of his life and he happened to be born among us because his father, Captain Andrew Moynihan, was a professional soldier serving in the 2nd Battalion of the 8th the King's Regiment which was doing garrison duty in Malta at that time.

Captain Moynihan had seen active service in the Crimean War where he distinguished himself in the trenches before Sebastopol. He was wounded in many places but in spite of his injuries he succeeded in rescuing a wounded officer from the Russians though under terrific fire from them in open ground. For this daring gallantry he was awarded the Victoria Cross, a decoration that had just been instituted and which has remained the highest British honour bestowed on a soldier for bravery in the field. However, it was not the enemy's bullet but disease that brought Captain Andrew's life to a rapid and early end.

Malta was then notorious for the high incidence of fevers both among civilians and servicemen. It was one of these fevers that attacked and killed Captain Andrew on the 19th May 1867 at the age of 37 years. One of Moynihan's biographers ascribed Captain Andrew's death to undulant fever but the newspapers of the time attributed it to typhoid fever. Eight years previously Assistant Surgeon J. A. Marston, while in Malta with the Royal Artillery, had differentiated undulant from typhoid but for many years afterwards

some medical men continued to regard undulant merely as a variant of typhoid fever and it was not until 1886 that Sir David Bruce, the discoverer of *Brucella melitensis* in the human spleen, afforded definite and conclusive proof that undulant fever was a disease *sui generis*. Whatever the correct diagnosis might have been in the case of Captain Andrew Moynihan, there is no reason to believe that it would have made any difference to the outcome of the illness considering the impotence of the therapeutic armamentarium of the time.

Captain Andrew Moynihan died at his residence at Floriana and was buried at Ta' Braxia Cemetery on the outskirts of the fortifications of Floriana where he had often turned out his smart body of soldiers for review. His grave — the gift of his brother officers — is still there. It is marked by a simple slab of Malta stone with a cross laid upon it and bears the dates of his birth and death, his rank and regiment.

Berkley George Andrew Moynihan visited Malta in 1932 as Lord Moynihan. It was during a hurried cruise to the Mediterranean so that he could spend only one day in the Island, but he managed to find the time to visit the house where he was born and also the grave of his father. Perhaps you would like to follow his footsteps and wend your way there — as I have done several times — to pay homage to the memory of Captain Andrew who was instrumental, through his son born in Malta, in giving to suffering humanity an outstanding surgical pioneer; and as we pause by his resting place let us recall the verses from Chapter 44 of Ecclesiasticus:

*"Let us now praise famous men that
begat us*

*Their seed shall remain for ever and
their glory shall not be blotted out.
Their bodies are buried in peace; but
their name liveth for evermore".*

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